

## Angifi Dladla and the Bleakness of Freedom

*Angifi Dladla is a Poet of No Sure Place. His poetry speaks for the marginalized and explores the otherwise unmentioned dynamics of South Africa's political and social landscape. In this article I explore how this label is demonstrated within his two collections of poetry, The Girl Who Then Feared to Sleep and Lament for Kofifi Machu. More specifically, my argument engages with the evolving meanings of freedom evoked by Dladla, first in his apartheid era poetry and, second, in that of today's post-apartheid situation. I demonstrate how the black-on-black violence of the 1980s townships caused a sense of confinement that forced Dladla within himself. Only then was he able to understand freedom and chart a way forward. Following this, the article turns towards those poems that depict contemporary South Africa. My analysis suggests that when freedom, not oppression, is the official political environment of the day, the reality for many is only continued violence and despair. To chart a way out of this bleak malaise, Dladla exhorts others to write in the style of his own poetry.*

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*New Coin* is a prestigious poetry journal published out of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa at Rhodes University, South Africa. Within its pages is something quite different and quite unique: a determination to embrace difference. I have written elsewhere (xxx) about how this determination came about, beginning in the early 1990s under the editorship of Robert Berold and continuing today as the journal continues its groundbreaking path under the stewardship of Gary Cummiskey. Where other poetry journals have struggled to survive, embraced political prescription, or attempted to avoid political content at all costs, *New Coin* has forged ahead in publishing a mix of work irrespective of theme or the contributor's race. If a poem was good, took risks, and said something new, it would likely be

published. The result was a new type of poetry or, as David Alvarez (n.pag). more accurately puts it, “new poetries”.

These new poetries, however, had something in common. They were “unintimidated” (Bila 1) and did not hold back. As I have argued previously:

[*New Coin*] defied labels and explored the period’s political cross-currents [...]

Indeed, *New Coin* provided room for poets to explore and come to terms with their own deep-rooted individual fears against the backdrop of South Africa’s often turbulent and contested socio-political arena (xxx).

Thus *New Coin* featured poetry that got to the heart of South Africa’s complexity. It grappled with contradiction; it said the unsaid; it never stood still. In brief, it was what I have previously called a Poetry of No Sure Place (xxx). This is a form of poetry where both the poet and the reader are tipped off balance by work “depicting the political concerns and anxieties that, though shared by the majority of the South African population, had rarely been articulated before” (xxx).

Amongst the poets to publish in *New Coin*’s pages was Angifi Dladla, a creative writing teacher and poet-playwright from Ekurhuleni, an industrial conurbation east of Johannesburg that was formerly known as the East Rand. The son of a teacher and domestic worker, after his parent’s divorce he was schooled at St. Chad’s High School in Ladysmith where he first started to write and perform poetry. He continued to write poetry and drama during apartheid under the pseudonym Muntu wa Bachaki to avoid being traced by the authorities. His poetry reflects his political leanings and he has previously been described as both a Pan-Africanist and Pan-Humanist, believing “South Africa’s idea of ubuntu can be found among inhabitants of countries right across the globe” (Sole n.pag). Moreover, his

contributions to *New Coin*, and his work more generally, epitomizes the type of literature that the label Poetry of No Sure Place attempts to define. At its heart is a perpetual sense of movement, primarily achieved by the vivid, yet shifting, emotions Dladla represents. Moreover, it features disturbingly clear imagery that brings into sharp focus the hopes and frustrations of ordinary South Africans along with the missed opportunities, arguments and violence that characterize much of South Africa's past and present. As Kelwyn Sole (n.pag) rightly observes:

Perhaps most strikingly, Dladla is the master of concise, surreally tinted but devastating images of the real; who can forget [in 'Vacancy'] the "red/shoe on the railway" that "licks shuddering wounds and/wails like a cheated/coffin"?

The following pages explore in detail both of these themes: Dladla's imagery and the conflicting emotions that underpin his work. My analysis will concentrate on his two published collections both of which were released through Robert Berold's Deep South Press. *The Girl Who Then Feared to Sleep* [*The Girl*], published in 2001, includes many poems originally written during the apartheid period. *Lament to Kofifi Machu* [*Lament*], meanwhile, was released over fifteen years later in 2017. The poems within it were selected from an earlier manuscript, *We Are All Rivers*, that had initially been earmarked for publication in 2009 but was delayed due to Dladla's other commitments running writing workshops at Groenpunt Correctional Services in South Africa's Free State province (Penfold, "Being"). Through this dual analysis, I will showcase just how Dladla has become a Poet of No Sure Place.

The initial focus will be on *The Girl*. I trace how Dladla moved away from the overarching political narratives of the time to instead depict something much more personal:

the everyday experiences of township life and his own sense of self. The second half of the article provides a close reading of *Lament*, illustrating Dladla's growing sense of freedom and his desire to "reflect, ponder and expand" (Penfold, "Being") on a much wider scale. This route through his work, however, sees us encounter what is perhaps South Africa's most complex contradiction – one that ensures all who dwell upon it lose any sense of sure-footedness they may previously have felt. Indeed, my conclusions remark on the despair that can accompany freedom. Though everyday life under apartheid was one of sheer horror, as observed in *The Girl*, Dladla was forced to look inward where he examined the human spirit and encountered a revitalizing sense of hope. Conversely, the freedom of democracy, which allows one to look outwards, results only in a panorama of horror and despair; hope diminishing; "a future unfolding three times: Bleak, bleaker, bleakest" (Penfold, "Being").

### **Fatal Intimacies**

Perhaps rightly, and to no extent surprising, was the tendency for South African literature of the apartheid era to explicitly write the political. Mongane Serote ("Ordinary People" 149) observed how, for anti-apartheid writers, "everything we did [had to be] highly politicised". Apartheid infiltrated all aspects of Black life in the country. Culture, to borrow a line from Serote's poem 'The Breezing Dawn of the New Day' (6), was there to "give them the full fury of our wrath". Even in the years immediately following the transition to democracy in 1994 much literature continued towards "black and white, good and bad, past and present" (Frenkel and MacKenzie 5). The validity of this approach is not for me to comment upon here and of course there are exceptions. That said, this binary, overtly political style obscured, and in instances completely missed, the nuances of the ordinary: those everyday acts of personal resistance and struggle that governed day-to-day life for the majority (Ndebele, "Rediscovery" 143).

Njabulo Ndebele (Foreword i) has described the series of “fatal intimacies” that made up life under apartheid. It was not merely white versus black. Instead, apartheid was built up of complicated choices, allegiances and loyalties that operated across and between numerous boundaries simultaneously. These were boundaries of race, generation, family, and even within oneself as an individual. And it is these fatal intimacies that Dladla unpicks. The direct appearance of interracial conflict in *The Girl* is somewhat less than in other contemporary collections. Only a small number of the collection’s fifty-two poems explicitly evoke white/black conflict. This is not to say Dladla is in any way downplaying the grander apartheid narratives or the injustices of racism across the globe. Indeed, where it is mentioned his views are clear, for example in the poems ‘Whiteness’ and ‘From Sunrise’ (Penfold, *Black Consciousness* 124). ‘When I was Child’ perhaps provides the starkest condemnations of ‘the whiteman’s’ colonial actions. It depicts the stealing of historical artifacts, the burying of Black history, and the isolating of indigenous people. Dladla’s views are unmistakable in the lines:

when i was a child,  
i hurt and maimed and killed for fun;  
i pulled the noses and ears of things,  
i stoned things,  
i hunted things.

when i was a child, i was a whiteman (Dladla, *The Girl* 46).

Dladla’s main focus, though, remains the more immediate aspects of life in the townships. ‘Blood Drizzles’ outlines the emphasis of the collection by describing:

blood drizzles under the mattresses  
turning the huge room into a swimming pool;  
tender and desperate things  
float in the red as some little  
creatures try to swim  
for their lives.

These drizzles refocus our attention on the individual battles that were fought daily because of apartheid and constituted its real horror. It is only by following these through that we can fully understand the overall Black experience in South Africa and internationally.

[...] blood flows  
going other tributaries...

a river rages to the red,  
red ocean of the continent (Dladla, *The Girl* 30).

The majority of the poems in *The Girl* either recall or were written at the time of South Africa's two States of Emergency in the late 1980s. The possibilities of change seemed remote. Any utterance to that effect was simple rhetoric "which becomes an echo/the nearer they advance" (Dladla, *The Girl* 14). Instead, for most people in the townships, the daily pattern of life was undoubtedly one of death. This is vividly described in 'Dreaming'. For the poet, upon leaving his home, "gingerly of course", to walk his neighborhood:

nothing i saw but the place i knew

had turned into a red swamp

[...]

nothing i saw but bloodied shoes and

shreds of flesh on the razor fence (Dladla, *The Girl* 17).

Yet what is striking about this violence is that the majority of the death depicted within *The Girl* is a result of the troubles that occurred between the 1980's competing liberation movements. Dladla exposes and attempts to come to terms with "the demon behind the so-called 'black-on-black' violence" (Penfold, "Being").

An issue which remains taboo, 'black-on-black' violence was frequently avoided by many commentators and writers in the late 1980s and early 1990s despite its proliferation. This reticence is arguably explained by the troublesome questions of complicity and collaboration – just some of the fatal intimacies examined by Jacob Dlamini – that it raised. For Dladla, however, 'black-on-black' violence was a "community issue, our issue" (Dladla, Interview with Michelle McGrane n.pag) which deserved attention. "Here is a poet", writes Sole (n.pag), "who requires us to look at compelling events and issues from which our first instinct has been to look away". And Dladla has excavated this violence through several different forms. At first, he was heavily involved in the play *Sibangani* - produced by the Community Life Network's Akudlalwa Communal Theatre network - that showcased how "the war was beyond the UDF [United Democratic Front] and the IFP [Inkatha Freedom Party]" (Dladla, Interview with Michelle McGrane n.pag) but instead affected everyone within the townships.<sup>1</sup> *The Girl* acts as a continuation of his interventions.

The most startling representation of this black on black ‘war’ occurs in Dladla’s depiction of necklacing in ‘Impressions’.<sup>2</sup> Further illustrating his use of intensely physical imagery and the visceral reactions he provokes, he describes a necklaced corpse as “human gravy in the sun” (Dladla, *The Girl* 22). Elsewhere he examines how this violence between two of the period’s competing African political parties affected everybody and ruined innocence. ‘Rubbished’ is the final snapshot of a primary school child lying on a garbage dump after being shot and hacked to death by members of the IFP. Dladla wrote the poem only several hours after witnessing the atrocity and describes how the potential the child offered has been completely destroyed: “His wounds have stolen the thunder”. He now lies still and “his eyes will never see,/but green flies will lend us theirs” (Dladla, *The Girl* 25). Indeed, reflecting on his life as a young adult while surrounded by this township violence Dladla recalls: “We were helpless” (Penfold, “Being”). The all-encompassing nature of apartheid and the increased tensions it caused between the Black community meant, whichever path was chosen or whichever party one joined, the future only offered a single outcome:

like a flea  
at the mercy of thumbs,  
here i am  
between left and right.  
the distance is the same  
my blood, my soul.  
listen to the sputtering of spouts  
as thumbs dance a smashing dance  
at the festival of blood.... (Dladla, *The Girl* 31).



There was no escape from this atmosphere of violence. Dladla, a former teacher, has even observed how it followed him into work: “Remember, I was a teacher, contained even at school. Sometimes soldiers would comb the staffroom, offices and classrooms” (Penfold, “Being”). Rather than being a safe haven for pupils and staff alike, school saw merely a continuation of violence. This is shown in ‘An Intruder’, which was initially written in 1979 after Dladla himself was attacked at a school in Vosloorus by “the local madman” (Dladla, Interview with Joan Metelerkamp, 176). During the poem, a mad intruder enters Illinge High “swifter than a whirlwind” and greets staff “with balls/of fists and yellow of teeth”. The episode culminates with boys storming at the intruder and the girls yapping ““don’t kill him, he’s a loony!””. What remains important when reading the poem is how the poem provides an ominous foreshadowing of future brutality. The teacher recovers from the attack but is “full of revenge/and shrapnels...” (Dladla, *The Girl* 49). Meanwhile the boys’ surge towards the intruder in order to defend their teacher would go on to highlight another example of apartheid’s fatal intimacy. The students’ loyalty to their teacher forces upon them, at an early age, an unavoidable intimacy with violence that suggests few alternatives for the future. And this future was realized during the 1980s, giving the poem a wider truth. Children were frequently exploited by the UDF to silence opponents and coerce people to join them. They would “burst into classrooms”, as Dladla’s madman did several years earlier, and “force other [students] out [of class]” (Dladla, Interview with Joan Metelerkamp 177). ‘An Intruder’, therefore, brings our attention towards the complex allegiances that operate between the generations. Apartheid reversed the relationship between child and adult. In an all-encompassing climate of fear it was the children who policed township order and “teachers [who] were scared of these ‘comrades’” (Dladla, Interview with Joan Metelerkamp 177).

Conflict between the generations and the opportunities for a future without violence, or the lack thereof, are explored in two further poems. ‘The Building, The Weapon, The Way’, which is the collection’s penultimate poem and the final poem to focus on politics and the surrounding situation, employs parallelism to compare apartheid rule with any future dispensation. It ends with an ominous warning:

the way you are, is the way he was  
growing blindly without shame;  
ignoring the rumbling under his feet (Dladla, *The Girl* 79).

The suggestion behind these lines precisely mirrors the second poem of the collection, ‘Exposure’. This, interestingly, is also the first poem to move towards an exploration of externality (as I will discuss below, the first and last poems of *The Girl* concentrate on the poet’s inner feelings). ‘Exposure’ starts by conjuring the specter of crime that has become so pervasive in contemporary South Africa and, as Stephen Ellis suggests, can arguably be directly traced to apartheid’s legacy. Dladla (*The Girl* 12) writes,

the voodoo and the electronic  
securities must be in deep sleep  
with dogs and neighborhood watch!

Though these security systems are in place, the poet’s deceased stepfather enters the house and visits the sleeping poet. There he begs forgiveness for the wrongs he committed towards his stepson while alive. Indeed, Dladla himself was once poisoned by his stepfather (Dladla, Interview with Joan Metelerkamp 177) and ‘Exposure’ explains ‘how he died to leave me in

peace”. Forgiveness is forthcoming and the stepfather “relieved” glides away. However, the poem ends on an ironic note. The poet’s wife, upon hearing the story, chuckles “‘poets are dreamers...’”. Such an ending undoes the peaceful resolution initially presented: There is no forgiveness and, still dreaming of the troubled past, clearly the poet is not in peace although his stepfather is no longer physically present.

By bookending the majority of *The Girl* in this way, Dladla suggests that wherever one looks in the township or South Africa, there is only violence and death. ‘At The Government Mortuary’ describes,

still bodies  
white, black,  
pinkish and bluish  
on one another  
like huge matchsticks (Dladla, *The Girl* 34)

The bodies “glare at the foul sun” and, therefore, we can begin to understand how there is no light. Persistent death will always remain abhorrent and difficult to understand. Yet death is everyone’s outcome regardless of race, political orientation, or age. Indeed, when death is all around you as Dladla so clearly evokes, what is the purpose of life? This is the question we are forced to contemplate as “mortals go on with their lives;/paraphernalia of the scatterings” (Dladla, *The Girl* 27).

### **A persisting sense of reassurance**

The response *The Girl* gives to this question is one of exploration. As I outlined in the introduction to this article, Dladla is so wounded by the result of apartheid’s ‘fatal intimacies’

and “our people’s madness” (Penfold, “Being”) that he retreats into himself. The portraits of violence painted in the collection, the pessimistic views of the future presented in ‘Expose’ and ‘The Building, The Weapon, The Way’ are not the beginning and end although they almost seem to be. Instead, Dladla includes two songs that act almost as a prefix and suffix. Ultimately these are an affirmation. Metelerkamp observes that “grace and pain co-exist in [Dladla’s] work. [He] manages to observe without being overwhelmed” (qtd. Sole n.pag). And if everywhere else is pain, ‘Song of a Fertility Doll’ and ‘Song of the Aged’ provide the grace.

‘Song of a Fertility Doll’, which opens the collection, gestures towards the overwhelming anguish outside. However, at its heart, the poem reveals the poet’s own courage and determination to persist.

Call me between your tears and eyes;  
i’m the shadow, i won’t drown  
draw me between your pain and faith;  
i’m the shadow that leads. (Dladla, *The Girl* 11)

The lexis is declarative and the statements simple so as to provide a certain sense of assurance. Furthermore, the spiritual tone conjured here contrasts sharply with the physicality depicted elsewhere. Just through this change in style it appears another option is being suggested. Dladla invokes “an energy that’s divine” and resides within us all. It is by being courageous and drawing upon this inner reserve that we can always imagine a fertile future and continue to hope. In Dladla’s own words:

The miracles are within us; we have a lot of power but we are not aware of the power we have. The fertility doll is a symbol of that - I'm meditating on how we work from within to make things happen (Dladla, Interview with Joan Metelerkamp 177).

Additionally important is the placing of this poem at the beginning of the collection. 'Song of a Fertility Doll' is a page just turned; one that always lies just behind the surface horrors currently being encountered; a comfort consistently reminding the reader that there is human goodness.

Moving through the collection after this, the fatal intimacies explored above undoubtedly leave the reader doubting the faith that came increasingly far before. Can we help but start to question the purpose of life amidst such violence? Dladla, thus, finally returns to the inner spirit. 'Song of the Aged' ends as a lasting sanctum of hope. For twenty-five lines out of twenty-eight it appears as another exploration of pending death.

the body i had, is not of today;  
the rhythm is all gone,  
there is no dance anymore,  
i'm a dancer without a dance.

[...]

i've got nothing left now;  
oh my man, rubbish me not!  
you are there, i'm down

here. our relay (Dladla, *The Girl* 80).

But this is not the end. The image of the relay connotes an opportunity for the baton to be picked up again. Placed between dying and living on, the poet returns at the final moment to our inexhaustible inner spirit and the enduring hope it provides: “i’ve got nothing left now;/but a bright star i hear far, far.../ within”.

### **A matchbox for freedom**

Aside from writing poetry and theatre, Dladla has long been involved in the education of inmates in prisons across South Africa. Chief amongst his activities is working with prisoners to help them explore their own experiences through literature. For example, in 2009, he compiled and published *Reaching out – Voices from Groenpunt Maximum-Security Prison*. Through this initiative, Dladla described how “the prisoners were freed that day. They were freed by their own book” (Penfold, “Being”). And this claim summarizes his view of literature, and poetry in particular. It offers a method of exploring your self and releasing inner aspirations. As he suggests elsewhere: “To me poetry is the language of the soul, the lingua franca of dreams [...] I am just a matchbox for a person’s inner match to unleash his or her human goodness” (Dladla, Interview with Michelle McGrane n.pag).

*The Girl*, I have shown, does exactly this. ‘Song of the Aged’ returns to our “inner match” and suggests the possibility of human goodness. Indeed, halfway through the collection is the poem ‘Tomorrow’. In an unrelenting list, Dladla describes the current situation of hunger, butchery, genocide and fear. But it is a poem that, as the title suggests, looks forward. It showcases the possibility tomorrow offers to expose these injustices and call for change if only we can find the inner strength to do so:

“oh gods!” i’ll cry, “disarm the son of man  
before his fear explodes; remind him  
of who he really is.” tomorrow  
i’ll fly out of my... body” (Dladla, *The Girl* 40).

As a collection, therefore, *The Girl* reveals a poet forced by overwhelming violence to explore his own self and the fatal intimacies that lie within. Torn between life and death, *The Girl* ends with hope. Ultimately it gestures towards the possibility of freedom. But what constitutes this freedom?

Fast-forward fifteen years and Dladla’s second published collection, *Lament for Kofifi Machu* is the answer. The poems were written during the years of a burgeoning democracy and their lines are a constant comment on freedom. In ‘Little Things’ the poet addresses a little bird he discovers in his garden; an animal who effortlessly flies “from branch to branch” (Dladla, *Lament* 30). This innocence and free sense of movement, as if the bird can “teleport” itself, is driven by “whispers/of whistles that overwhelm me”. And, interestingly, this phrase connotes the same sense of silent determination that Dladla previously evoked as part of the human spirit. This is the inner power through which we can channel hope and move towards freedom. ‘Little Things’ ends with the poet doing exactly that: “verily, verily I cast my poetic/farthing into the treasure”.

The first section of *Lament* perfectly illustrates Dladla’s move towards treasured freedom. Gone is the feeling of confinement that persisted throughout *The Girl*. It is replaced by a refreshing range of themes, techniques, and forms. Even the mix of languages used “show that he is now a man of the world: ‘Feu de joie’, ‘hara-kiri’, ‘zuri sana’” (Penfold, “Being”). The poet is able to travel and imagine what he will. Across the poems there is a sense of mobility: the ferry ride to Robben Island in ‘Sailing to Leper Island’; the trip from

Katlehong to Dukathole in ‘Son From Dukathole’ which is done “by train not by taxi” (Dladla, *Lament* 13); the images of the Kalahari evoked in ‘Belated’. In ‘Last Night’, the poet even leaves his body:

For weeks I had been preparing  
for this up-flight! Up, up  
through the ceiling  
I defied gravity. (Dladla, *Lament* 32)

He enters somewhere in “another realm” where he sees images that remind him of the Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt and the Tasmanian Devils of Australia. And this freedom to explore is endless. Consider, for example, the last line: “Peacefully, i continued my voyage...”

Alongside these voyages across space, and perhaps illustrating freedom more than anything else, is the wide range of voices Dladla uses. This democratic chorus features the words of all people “irrespective of age, wealth or status” (Penfold, “Being”), and covers a myriad of subjects, not just politics. We listen to Udibi, the Zulu courier-poet of God, and other mythical beings; we are taught by stalwarts of African liberation history; we witness a dog waiting outside a shebeen; we hear directly from children who are expressing their views on education; we celebrate along with an international gathering of football supporters; we are urged to purchase food from a township chicken vendor. Moreover, *Lament* becomes a stage where everyone can act. As Dladla explains:

I visit all members of our society to push forward our democracy and advocate transformation [...] For example, in the poem ‘Prayers’, I feature a child from the



slum along with the nouveau riche and the wounded African masses. In 'Marikana Chorus' I'm also all-embracing: I cast the National Commissioner of Police, politicians, unionists, a representative from Lonmin mining company, police, miners, and mourners. (Penfold, "Being")<sup>3</sup>

Yet, within this varied choir, it is the voice of the marginalized that continues to be unambiguously dominant. Dladla is, after all, a Poet of No Sure Place; a poet who steadfastly vocalizes the thoughts of those who would otherwise remain unheard.

By speaking on their behalf, Dladla is able to confront numerous taboos. 'A Great Dance' explores the intricacies of sex. The poem epitomizes Dladla's ability to mix the physical with the emotional. Images of animalistic passion - "she was like a python, coiling around me./Then we were like cows,/licking each other until we glowed" (Dladla, *Lament* 21) - contrast with those of deep intimacy:

We danced a great dance;  
a gentle, revolving dance  
of the spheres, a graceful  
choreography of all time.

The taboo of sex as explored here also brings an intensely private and personal aspect to the collection. This is juxtaposed against the political marginalization that is also vocalized, though this is itself imbued with Dladla's own private emotions. In particular, Dladla's pursuit of freedom is premised on coming to terms with his and his nation's past. Not the past of simplified patterns and assumptions provided by the powerful but the complicated, unpalatable, marginalized past that is lived by the majority. For example, 'Sacrifice' presents

this message by returning to Dladla's troubled relationship with his stepfather. The poem sees Dladla remember the conflicting emotions of his childhood - his own dislike for his stepfather but his mother's hopes to "cajole/me into calling him 'Pa'" (Dladla, *Lament* 15) - and his eventual decision to leave home after his food is poisoned by his stepfather. It is this act of leaving behind which ends his remembrances and the poem:

I left. Left home  
with a living wound.  
Left behind a blood  
clot.

Thus, Dladla's words represent an ending that suggests future possibilities. Returning to the past and choosing to move on may be a painful wound. Yet merely leaving the past behind constitutes a blockage to freedom.

Elsewhere, the politics of this message is tackled more directly. 'I Failed My Children' directly explores Dladla's own experiences of apartheid's forced removals policy. Pressed by his five children who "have formed a union, against me" (Dladla, *Lament* 26), the poet is driven back to the place of his childhood, "that place with its graves [that] no longer exists". For the poet, this revisiting of a painful past is almost unbearable:

This time tears trickled down...  
These kids don't understand, don't know  
the wounds we had to bury  
to have a smile and get on with life.

However, for the children - the next generation - their future and freedom require the knowledge brought about by such painful revisiting. Though already “they know our house/where I later grew up. They know my parents, and/they were at the funeral of their grandmother”, that is not enough. It is only through knowing all aspects of their family’s history, even that which hurts, that “we’ll be complete”.

Considered together these two poems advocate the need to fully reflect on the past, however painful that experience may be, in order to gain a fulfilling future. After all, as Dladla highlights elsewhere in *Lament*, we have no choice but to move forward. The only choice is in how we do so. ‘Son from Dukathole’, the second poem in the collection, traces the poet’s return from a Johannesburg township to the rural township in the Eastern Cape where he grew up. Once arrived, he is struck by the changes that have occurred:

All is kwaito music.

No kwasa-kwasa dance music,

no mbaqanga, no reggae,

and no jazz here. (Dladla, *Lament* 13)<sup>4</sup>

The sounds of his past have quietened and the poet is now “an alien”. He is out of place. Life has moved on and he cannot return to the past he once knew. Indeed, the poem culminates with the lines, “where is the house...?/Who can dirt-read it?”. Elsewhere, the poem ‘Someone’ makes a similar point. Here, Dladla again returns to the ephemeral spirit within us that, as shown above, is the common trope in all his explorations of future freedom. Our inability to re-inhabit the past is shown by this power and how it inexorably propels us forward.

There is Someone,  
or a presence,  
I am not sure;  
but I feel it  
driving me - a voiceless  
passenger, in cycles. (Dladla, *Lament* 28).

The final line of this stanza leads us towards what is perhaps *Lament*'s main argument. As just mentioned, it is not possible to completely return to the past although Dladla does advocate a necessary and critical reflection on past experiences. There is a choice to learn from the past or not. This choice determines the future that is born. To return briefly to 'Someone': the penultimate stanza contains the lines 'Today, those flames are within,/lighting the path for people/between life-and-death'. Future freedom, therefore, can go one of two ways. If lessons are learnt from the past, perhaps it will lean towards the democratic utopia South Africa imagined in 1994. If not, the future seems merely to be the next step in a potentially violent cycle: if you recall 'The Building, The Weapon, The Way', South Africa's future being built in apartheid's footsteps.

### **The cries of the double-wounded**

Dladla's view in *Lament*, I suggest, is that South Africa's political elites have chosen the second option. The collection features a plea for the country's new leaders to learn from the past. There is the call for a wiser choice that honors those who struggled so hard for liberation:

Oh, rise higher, lover

of long ago, don't rubbish  
the vows, the rites of our shrines.

[...]

Don't go that route, lover  
of long ago! Next to you, oh!  
I'm vulnerable, vulnerable. (Dladla, *Lament* 64)

The phrase “lover/of long ago”, however, implies separation. The poet's plea has fallen on deaf ears. Consequently, the freedom achieved has not seen any decrease in violence. New divides are emerging between those in power and those not, despite their mutual struggles in the recent past. This message is borne out particularly clearly in Parts II and III of *Lament*. In the words of Alan Finlay (111) writing in *New Coin*:

The title poem [‘Lament for Kofifi Machu’], which narrates the searing yearning of a young girl who longs for the return of Kofifi - an activist murdered by his handlers in exile - signals some of the central themes and stylistic devices in the book. The ‘lament’ is not just the girl's, but also the poet's - for himself, and for those he speaks to in these poems, whom he calls the ‘double-wounded’, those betrayed by the political and business elite post-1994.

The premise of a ‘double-wounding’ Finlay references is put forward in ‘Prayer for the Wounded’. Here, Dladla uses a variety of techniques to explicitly attack the freedom on offer in the post-apartheid state. First, is the physical imagery employed, for example “hold

this hand - charred/in this freezing freedom” (Dladla, *Lament* 52). The use of “charred” connotes fire and the violence Dladla observes across South Africa. Meanwhile it also seems to contradict the notion of a “freezing freedom”, thus drawing our attention to the cold-hearted attitudes of the country’s leaders and, arguably, illustrating how what has been realized stands in stark opposition to that which was hoped for. Secondly, there is only one instance of rhyme in the poem:

Merciful Father,  
imagine Flames of Tyres  
out of shameful graves  
lunging for People’s Pyres.

Our attention is immediately drawn to this image of the past, that of necklacing, which would seemingly not be out of place in the new “People’s Tyranny” described. And the necklace is a recurring image in the final poems of *Lament*, for example Dladla’s reference to “Dous[ing] this dog with petrol, UDF style” (*Lament* 77) in ‘Something the Dead Know’. Clearly, new forms of black-on-black violence are at play in South Africa. Finally, ‘Prayer for the Wounded’ uses a repetitious refrain to enforce the poem’s, and the collection’s, central message in the simplest terms: “it won’t work, it won’t work,/this resurrection thing!”

The form of this so-called resurrection is expanded upon in ‘O Yesterday’, where Dladla’s imagery offers an ironic representation of South Africa’s new divides. We are immediately confronted by an obese and amoebic, Kiss-Madolo or knock-kneed woman who “shakes/the earth like an elephant in haste” (Dladla, *Lament* 46). In contrast, the poet stands “a skeleton/slouching against a stranger’s car”. This physical difference is then translated into material comment, showcasing what Dladla has elsewhere labeled the “arrogant [and]

shameless” (Penfold, “Being”) attitude of South Africa’s political elites who consistently grandstand a lifestyle so out of touch with the everyday lived experience of the poor:

Long is the distance to my Mercedes.

Were I that Kiss-Madolo,

three hours would be three minutes.

Moreover, the ruptures between the powerful and the majority are not only shown by the dramatic size differential evoked here but also through the use of the modifier “amoebic”. Politicians have no fixed stance. Instead their beliefs and actions change to meet circumstance. This ideological malleability is played out to the detriment of those they claim to represent:

You, a mummy rattling. Pain

is knowing you’ll be buried

with pomp, sponsored lies and extremes -

You, a mere podium for spin doctors.

The contrasting experiences depicted above cause an unsettling sense of movement to flow throughout the poem. Yet, there is still balance to be found because Dladla attempts to unite all those who suffer at the hands of the powerful. The first stanza includes the simile, “I’m like a fountain groping to the ocean” while the poem ends with “We are all rivers”. These lines directly recall the exact same metaphors made in ‘Blood Drizzles’ in *The Girl*. The marginalized citizens Dladla speaks for may have their own individual struggles but they are all victims of the same “mega-slaughter, mega-suffering”. And Dladla is, as always, prepared

to apportion the blame directly onto the ANC which he condemns thus: “But this, this virus/gorging me, like hungry hagfish,/has nothing divine within”.

This final line explicitly references the religious lexis the ANC frequently frames itself within. The journalist Gareth van Onselen (n.pag) has previously described the ANC as having “many of the characteristics and traits that a religious movement may have”. Former President Zuma was particularly keen to relate this comparison in his speeches. For example, in 2011 he suggested that “when you vote for the ANC, you are also choosing to go to heaven” (Osman n.pag). Most famous are Zuma’s repeated predictions that the ANC would rule until Jesus comes again. These are not spared Dladla’s ironic gaze. In ‘Prayer of the New Black Man’, which ends with the utterance “Amen, till the Second Coming, Amen!” (Dladla, *Lament* 51), Dladla uses what he calls “judoka writing” (Penfold, “Being”) which translates to the use of the opponent’s words against him. In the prayer, framed by its religious tenor, Zuma’s voice dismisses the poverty and anger felt by “those still trapped in slums” as mere jealousy. They are irrelevant and “what they envy are just my fatted shares”. The bitterness expressed here is intense and the poem clearly exposes the injustices and hypocrisy of the ANC’s recent governance. To look at Dladla’s words is to confront a second coming, not of the Divine Savior’s but of apartheid horror.

To reinforce apartheid’s second coming, there is a large degree of intertextual referencing operating solely within *Lament*. Thus Dladla holds a mirror to the past and paints its reflection in contemporary South Africa. For example, I have already mentioned how ‘I Failed My Children’, one of the first poems in *Lament*, describes the horror of the forced removals conducted by apartheid authorities. It reads:

Who could return after bulldozers,  
storm troopers, rottweilers bundled us



in trucks with our cats, dogs

and broken furniture to far-off locations? (Dladla, *Lament* 27)

This image is repeated in the final part of *Lament* and in two poems that explore two of the most discussed events of recent South African history, which I now tackle in turn.

The FIFA World Cup in 2010 was promoted as a moment of “rebirth” (Mbeki) announcing the newfound optimism across South Africa and Africa more widely. It was also a democratic event hosted to heal old divisions (Alegi and Bolsmann; Calland). Such is the setting of Dladla’s ‘Poet’s Report to FIFA’, in which he describes the democratic unity, the color and noise of football’s showpiece event through cumulative imagery. However, one cannot fail to notice an ironic aspect to lines such as “How pleasing to the soul witnessing a ball/rounding off colors and tongues to One Family” (Dladla, *Lament* 80). Indeed, the poem ends with a break from spectacle and a devastating return to reality:

And so FIFA Con test left us

with stillborn Zakumi and Diski-dance.

What a rich harvest of red ants and

new shantytowns was won.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, the final two lines add the reference to the Red Ants portray the returned policy of forced removals and demonstrate that, to the poor, the World Cup was not a celebration.<sup>6</sup> Rather, they were left to struggle, pawns to be relocated, the victims of political and corporate “self-puffery” (Penfold, “Being”).

The second example presents Dladla at his most fierce and, with the inclusion of stage directions alongside other theatrical techniques, superbly highlights his crossover drama-

poetry form. 'Marikana Chorus', a poem of three acts, represents the voice of the miners caught up in the 2012 Marikana Massacre. Dladla is speaking for those who are perhaps the epitome of the marginalization and violence occurring in contemporary society. Act One serves as another demonstration of judoka writing and you can clearly hear the voices of the state authorities. Alongside these words are Dladla's own, more personal condemnations of the government and, in particular, its alignment with big business:

No one can drive a wedge between us and Lonmin.

No anarchist can retard this homegrown reconciliation.

We'll crush and pulverize for Developer Lonmin.

This country needs native capital for modernization. (Dladla, *Lament* 84)

Similar tones of neo-colonialism punctuate almost every line and again we encounter language that conjures that familiar image of past forced removals: "I give you a helicopter, razor wire/rottweilers, horses, machine guns./Come down hard on those dissidents".

What remains interesting when juxtaposing 'Poet's Report to FIFA' with 'Marikana Chorus' in this way, is not just their shared similarity to the past but also the reasons behind these repeated removals. Arguably, the first results from the ANC's and South African government's desire to advance their country's - and, given Mbeki's words in 2004, arguably Africa's - self-promotion and self-interest. The second example concerns the promotion and self-interest of Western capital first and foremost, in the guise of the mining conglomerates. Thus, for Dladla, these are not two separate beasts inflicting violence upon the marginalized but two sides of the same coin. The coin has been inherited from the past and is explicitly labeled in 'Marikana Chorus' Act Three:

Marikana, Marikana,  
the name Marikana  
tastes like tears of old  
streaming from new  
widows, and orphans.

[...]

Marikana, Marikana,  
tina ai funa lo New Apartheid.

‘Marikana Chorus’, therefore, represents the best example of the double-wounding that can be read across the majority of *Lament’s* pages. It commemorates an episode of history when “the blacks in power did the white thing to the black bodies” (Penfold, “Being”). For Dladla this is the story of the New South Africa; the story of freedom.

### **Freedom’s final story**

In this article I have traced Dladla’s poetry across a period of nearly forty years. We have moved from the States of Emergency that plunged the townships of 1980s South Africa into extreme violence through to a post-apartheid situation marked by the hopes of democracy turned to renewed despair. Thus, in *The Girl*, we encountered a poet who, forced by the death and destruction all around him, decided to retreat into himself as a means of survival. During these moments of introspection that opened and closed his first collection, Dladla was able to “get strength, direction and assurance” (Penfold, “Being”). Examinations of the human spirit became a gesture of courage and hope whereby a path to freedom, though difficult, could

finally be plotted. As the years passed, and apartheid ended, these hopes initially appeared as reality. There is a democratic undertone that runs throughout *Lament*, highlighted in the variety of languages and subjects portrayed. However, it quickly becomes evident that democracy is not synonymous with freedom. New forms of black-on-black violence are being committed that betray old promises and mean the past has not been revisited for the lessons it may yield but for the forms of control and violence that can be continued. The future appears bleak.

But perhaps that should not be where the story ends. My analysis has demonstrated Dladla's determination to probe the difficult histories and explore the fatal intimacies that determined apartheid rule and continue today. Furthermore, his poetry has remained a voice for those who inhabit the margins and are so often overlooked. These traits along with his apprehension for South Africa's future make him a Poet of No Sure Place. And to return one final time to *Lament*, nowhere are all these characteristics of Poetry of No Sure Place more evident than in 'These People'. The title itself somewhat derogatorily connotes marginalization and the ever-increasing gap between the ANC government and those they rule, further enhanced by the first lines: "You sense something, something wormy/about these people?" (Dladla, *Lament* 72). Then follows a litany of distrust and anger aimed at those in power who "have no vision/without white supervision". But what remains important is the repeated phrase "there's you in me/and me in you". There is the opportunity for reunification; today's distance could be bridged, if only the critical words of the marginalized are heard. For Dladla, the ANC's ultimate failing is its vanity project of praise and its refusal to acknowledge the failings so often expressed in literature.

I mourned about proposals

getting lost in the labyrinth of funding,

‘Obstructing non-praise poets  
effects death of a language -  
garrotting of our of our humanity’.

It is within criticism and it is within the works of the unintimidated that truth and hope are found. Thus *Lament* ends with a call to arms:

Now is the moment;  
the great moment  
we have been waiting for.  
Let miracles begin,  
let life prevail,  
let stories roll,  
let drama flare up,  
let poetry explore,  
resound...! (Dladla, *Lament* 96).

And on this note I should perhaps conclude. Dladla’s poetry represents the bleakness of freedom. But it also presents light. That light is the poetry itself. To read his poems, therefore, is to be reminded that while there are words, there remains power. Both lie within us. Dladla has not quite given up... should we?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The United Democratic Front was a political movement established by the student leaders who remained in South Africa after the 1976 Soweto Uprisings. It initially comprised of local

‘study groups’ and continued to be an affiliation of several community focused regional secretaries. It adopted a non-racial doctrine and frequently drew upon the imagery and discourse of the ANC. For a fuller history please see Jeremy Seekings’s *The UDF*. The Inkatha Freedom Party was founded in what is now the Kwa-Zulu Natal province of South Africa and was established to promote Zulu nationalism. Although many of its leaders were initially ANC members, tensions between the two escalated throughout the 1980s. This resulted in township conflict between the IFP and the ANC wing of the UDF.

<sup>2</sup> Necklacing was a form of execution frequently used by the UDF. It was typically reserved for those deemed to be conspiring with the apartheid government. The victim was often forced to drink petrol, or ‘juice’ as it was known, before being doused with petrol and having a tire placed around their chest and arms. They were then set alight. Onlookers often proceeded to dance around the victim while singing ‘Sya Motha’ (‘We’re Basking in his Flame’).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Marikana Chorus’ is a poem exploring the 2012 Marikana Massacre, the most lethal instance of state-sanctioned forced in post-apartheid South Africa. On 10 August 2012, miners at the Marikana, Lonmin owned mine began a wildcat strike in a protest over wages and working conditions. Following several days of skirmishes between miners, the South African Police (SAPs), Lonmin security officials, and members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the order was given to disperse the strike on 16 August 2012. This resulted in the use of force as the police opened fire on the miners. 34 were killed and over 70 injured. A full inquiry has yet to be held and discussions continue over compensation.

<sup>4</sup> These lines reference common types of township music. Kwasa-kwasa originated from the Democratic Republic of Congo in the 1980s and the dance is marked by its hip and hand movements. Mbaqanga is heavily influenced by traditional Zulu music and was popularized by Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens in the 1960s and 1970s. Kwaito music, meanwhile, is a contemporary music form that has replaced many of these traditional township sounds. It is a mixture of house and hip-hop with a heavy bass rhythm and was first heard in Johannesburg in the late 1990s.

<sup>5</sup> Zakumi was the official mascot of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Diski-dance was the official dance throughout the tournament.

<sup>6</sup> The Red Ants are a private security company so called because of the red overalls and helmets they wear. They are hired to carry out evictions in illegally occupied or derelict housing. They also demolish shacks in vacant land.

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